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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: BASHAR PARDONS 190 POLITICAL PRISONERS TO SHORE UP
"NATIONAL UNITY"

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: A November 3 presidential decree granted amnesty to 190 Syrian political prisoners as part of reforms aimed at shoring up "national unity." The majority of freed prisoners were associated with Islamist groups; conspicuously absent from the parolees were the six remaining "Damascus Spring" activists, in jail since 2001. This is the most recent in a series of amnesties President Bashar al-Asad has signed since taking office. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) President Bashar al-Asad pardoned 190 political prisoners on November 3, coinciding with the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, which signals the end of the holy month of Ramadan. According to the official Syrian Arab News Agency, SANA, the pardons are part of a comprehensive reform policy "aimed at strengthening national unity" and one of a series of similar steps taken in recent years to "strengthen the internal front and firmly establish national dialogue." SANA noted that other measures will be taken to demonstrate that "the homeland has room for all." (NOTE: Such pardons at this time of the year are a normal part of the judicial landscape throughout the Arab world, although it is less common for governments to portray them, as SANA did, as part of a "reform policy" that will enhance national unity. END NOTE.)

3. (C) The vast majority of pardoned prisoners had been jailed for Islamist sympathies, according to prominent human rights activist and lawyer, Haitham al-Maleh. A number of human rights activists were also granted amnesty, including Atassi Forum member Ali al-Abdullah and Arab Human Rights Organization President Mohammed Radoun, both of whom were imprisoned in the past six months. Noticeably absent from the list are any of the six remaining Damascus Spring detainees, including jailed MPs Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsy. According to Maleh, four prisoners, including Radoun and Abdullah, were released from Aadra prison and 186 prisoners were freed from the Sednaya prison, including 101 Muslim Brotherhood associates, six Hizb a-Tahrir party associates, 13 Salafists, 20 Iraqi Ba'ath Party members, and 20 Palestinian activists.

4. (C) Prominent human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni noted that most of those released had been long-term detainees. He stated that many of the released Muslim Brothers' convictions were based on nominal ties to MB and that some detainees had been minors at the time of their arrest.

5. (C) These pardons are the latest in a series of mass amnesty declarations made by President Bashar al-Asad since he took office in 2000. Maleh noted to Poloff that approximately 300 political prisoners are still held at Sednaya prison, including 32 Hizb a-Tahrir Party associates, 156 Taqfir-wal-Hijra fundamentalists, and another hundred held on charges relating to "collusion with the enemy." Bunni added that 100 Kurds are also held at Sednaya. While contacts like Bunni and Maleh report up to 400 political prisoners known with some certainty to still be in government prisons, they worry that SARG security services may be holding a significant number of others in non-official detention centers.

SECHE